

Many may think that the house was too small. Or that it wasn't a house at all, since it was shared among two separate families. Or perhaps they thought it an embarrassment when compared to her previous - and much bigger - homes.

But no.

The very first time she walked in, she knew. It felt right. It was homey, be it small. It was clean, be it old. She walked through many times, over and over, feeling its path. Yes, this was it. She made an offer that very same day. It was accepted. She had done it. She'd bought a house for her little family of four. Their very own house. Their home.

The next day she took her three young children to see it. Interest shone on their faces, covering the hurt of the past years. And for the first time in ages, the momma saw that the smiles on their faces shone through to their hearts.

A house with a yard. With actual bedrooms and their very own bathroom. Across the street from the school they would now attend. A house to grow up in, safe from the unhappiness that haunted them. They allowed themselves space to imagine. Where would their beds go? Would their beloved books fit here, or there? The little thoughts snuck in too, of course. Like, not just where would the cupboard go, but how long would it be theirs? But they shook their little heads free of those transgressions and returned to their open minds.

This was, again, their fresh start. The walls of the home would hold stories of their childhood. Of a momma working hard to keep the tummies fed, the brains learning, the hearts healing. There would be no more yelling. No pushing, no shoving, no more of all they'd seen. No mommas melting into the floor among fear and sadness so deep it turned her into a puddle. No hiding from the loud shouting when the man had come home late, angry, filled with the bottle spewing from his depth.

All went well. The family moved into their home. The momma kept working and the girls kept schooling. They arranged and rearranged their meager furniture until it felt just right, and sometimes again just because they could. The momma began to relax, just a little, just enough to let the children breathe on their own. And slowly, the children became children again. They played. They made friends. They talked through dinner and started to grow. They felt like a normal family. A mom, three kids. No talk of *him*.

Sometimes people asked, of course. Where is the father? What, no dad? But the momma smoothly covered. He was either traveling abroad or working crazy shifts. He didn't see the children because of his long hours. She began to feel confident in her lies of his whereabouts. The words sailed off her tongue and she no longer had the long pause while she thought up a story. The children, too, became well-versed. He was working. He was traveling. Easy lies, made up to cover the fact that after the worst of it, years ago, he no longer saw them by order of the law. That he no longer came around because he was stuck in a cell with four gray walls and no window. That after laying hands on the momma, the children, even the cat, finally, yet finally, someone noticed. They noticed things weren't quite right with the momma and her little ones. That they often had dried tears and bruises, old and new. And the law stepped in. And now they felt mostly safe.

Until, one day, things were no longer well. The momma was home that day, a sick child sleeping in her bed with chills and fever, when around the block came a police car. It drove slowly, checking addresses. And then, to her great defeat, it stopped in front of her little house across from the school.

Out walked two police officers, fast-paced and faces grim. Where are the children, they asked? One home sick, two at school. We will get them, the officers said, we will get them home right away.

Fear began to break out in beads of sweat on the momma's face. What is it, she asked? What has happened. We are sorry to tell you, they said, that he has escaped again. He talked only of finding his woman, his children, getting his family back. They were no longer safe. And as the third officer walked the two children in the door, their hearts sank. They knew. The life they always dreamed of, their fresh start, was over again.

Pack quickly, the officers said. Take only what you truly need. The beloved books were left in favor of a few outfits each. Precious stuffed animals set aside in place of papers and documents. And then, just like that, it was time. The officers allowed them one last walk through the path of the home. The children tried to memorize it; the wood floor with creaks in just the right places, the bedrooms they called their own, the little kitchen where they'd started to learn to laugh again.

As they rushed out, the momma snapped one picture. A picture of the little house they called home, of what had been their safe place. The children pushed their little faces against the windows, looking first at their home and then at their school with their new

friends inside. They drove away, sadness and fear overcome by adrenaline, as they began to wonder about their next fresh start. Who would they become next? Would they have a home? What would their names be? Would they ever really be safe? Goodbye little house, they said to themselves. Love to you. Perhaps we'll be back someday. Unlikely, but even those who have been through the worst of it maintain just a drop of hope. Hope speeding by toward yet another new future.